

A Pastoral Word to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America from the Conference of Bishops

In Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. – Ephesians 2

We greet you in the name of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. May your Lenten journey be a time of renewal in faith, and may the Easter promise surround you all.

As we conclude this meeting of the Conference of Bishops, we are convinced that this time of preparation for the 2009 Churchwide Assembly is a hopeful time. We are also convinced that the Holy Spirit is guiding our deliberation and is present in our earnest seeking. This same Spirit increases our ability to listen patiently and speak honestly to one another. In the many conversations, hearings, and correspondence of the past years, the Spirit has been present in the work of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality.

Our conversations in the Conference of Bishops have expressed the diversity of opinion that is common throughout this church. We give thanks for the unity binding us together in Christ, enabling us to listen carefully to one another, and joining us in a shared commitment to the mission of this church. We give witness to the creative possibilities of diverse perspectives within our baptismal unity. We have been led to new appreciation of our diversity, have been driven deeper into Scripture and Confessions, and have discovered new perspectives for life together as the Body of Christ.

We receive with gratitude *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust: A proposed social statement from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality*. Looking forward to the deliberation of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly and its decisions in regard to this document, we:

- rejoice in the strong affirmation of the gift of marriage, sexuality, and family;
- affirm the faithful exposition of Holy Scripture and Lutheran Confessions;
- support the bold confrontation of the commercialization of human sexuality pervading our culture;
- recognize that our world hungers for the joy of true intimacy and love we know in Christ Jesus our Lord;
- embrace our call to be a public church, thankful we are able to speak words of commitment and hope to a world in need of God's love in Christ; and
- acknowledge the unity of the Church is the Holy Spirit's continuing gift, and pray we may continually experience it.

The members of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality also accepted an additional responsibility, the charge of the 2007 Churchwide Assembly to prepare "Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies." This document articulately names the breadth of opinion on the possible rostering of persons in committed, faithful, same-gender relationships. Further, it presents one option for working through a process for

discernment and decision-making. We recognize that the content of the resolutions and the proposed process for considering them arise from the task force's deep respect for the faithful diversity they find present in this church.

We acknowledge with gratitude the faithful work of the members of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. Their work over the past eight years has been a profound gift to this church. Charged with daunting responsibilities, their resulting witness is articulate. Working together amidst a diversity representative of our church, they testify of their deepened love for one another. The experience of these faithful servants as they in their diversity came to these conclusions encourages us in our own diversity. No matter our particular position on the various issues of human sexuality, we are united by our confession of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all."

We prayerfully trust that God will guide this whole church in the coming months as we walk together in our deliberative processes. We know that our human decisions are often imperfect, but we are confident of God's persistent forgiveness. We are deeply committed to the unity of this church. Whatever decisions the assembly makes, we trust that God's Spirit will form the wisdom of God's faithful people gathered in deliberative assembly. We are prepared to stand together united in our continued service to the Church. May the Spirit align our efforts with God's gracious intent.

May Almighty God grant each of us the ability to listen with compassion and may we speak patiently. May our prayers for God-pleasing decisions be answered abundantly.

The Conference of Bishops

March 10, 2009